

Pershore/Salzwedel Link – Parish Exchange to Salzwedel June 2018



On June 7th 2018 a group of 8 members of the Pershore Abbey community flew to Germany to renew links with our fellow Christians who worship in our twin fellowship at the Katherinenkirche (St Catherine's Church) in Salzwedel, in the state of Sachsen Anhalt in Germany

The group was led by Angela Gerrard who flew out in advance and took the opportunity to catch up with family in Halle before arriving in Salzwedel.

Other members included Judy Dale, Bill and Julie Newman, Richard Champion, Jayne Parker, Alison Jackson and Michael Hodges.

How wonderful it was to be taken to the airport by our fellow Pershore Abbey worshippers Robin Hancox and John Andrews and to be picked up by Colin Reeves on our return.

We flew from Birmingham to Hannover on Thursday June 7th and stayed at the Maritim Airport Hotel which was a short walk from the Arrivals gate. The first thing we noticed when we arrived was just how hot the weather was on the Continent! In fact, when we arrived Germany was going through a sustained period of hot weather. It hadn't rained for 4 weeks. Our visit continued to be blessed by gorgeous weather for the whole of our stay.

After a hearty hotel breakfast we hit the road in our rental car (a small Ford minibus) which served as our means of transport for the next 4 days. Hiring a car was a good thing to do as it took the pressure off our hosts and enabled us to arrive and depart without trouble.

Salzwedel is a 2 hour drive along the straight flat empty roads of Lower Saxony before slipping over the former East West border at Wustrow into Sachsen Anhalt. Salzwedel is 8km over the former border and there is now virtually no evidence of the death zone that once divided East and West Germany during the Cold War.

The drive gave us a good impression of the forests and large fields so characteristic of the landscapes of the territory of the former kingdom of Prussia. We drove through prosperous towns and villages where sign posts to the churches showing the times of services were prominently displayed.

We received a warm welcome upon arrival at the Pfarrhaus (Vicarage) which lies directly opposite the unmistakable brick built 700 year old Katherinenkirche which feels larger than Pershore Abbey. Pastor Matthias Friske was at home to greet us, take us out to lunch with his wife Asimwe and offer us coffee and cakes in his garden in the afternoon. Our first afternoon was spent exploring the town with its wealth of timber framed houses – many of which had been beautifully restored – and baroque-style public buildings.

A short evening service in the Katherinenkirche allowed us to meet our hosts (Anke Luedecke, Frau Tegge, Frau Reicks, Hella & Matthias, Harald & Carola) and other members of the Salzwedel congregation and to worship with them in German and English. We then departed to their homes for the evening to get to know one another better. Language didn't seem to be a problem. Phrase books and guesswork enabled barriers to be overcome – sometimes with hilarity!

Friday morning began again in the Katherinenkirche with a short service led by our hosts Juergen, Asimwe, Simone and Mattias after which we visited a junior school in Salzwedel called the Praetoriusschule (Praetorian School). The children were eagerly awaiting our arrival and had been practising their best English phrases to use on their visitors from England. The school was small and spacious – just the sort of place you would want your children to go to. The headmaster was delighted to show us round and we spent a fascinating morning going from class to class chatting with the students. Naturally, the headmaster is a member of the Katherinenkirche congregation – so this was not the last we saw of him or some of his teachers and pupils.

After lunch in a smart Pizza restaurant in Salzwedel we set off for a visit to the Arendsee 20 kms distant. The Arendsee is a beautiful lake with a ruined convent. The church itself had been preserved. This provided a cool refuge. Such a picturesque setting deserved a picnic. Our hosts did not disappoint!



Saturday began with a visit to the Rundlingsdorf Museum in Lubeln. There are just over 100 Round Villages (“Rundligsdorfe”) remaining in Wendland – the area immediately south of the Elbe river which once was the home to over 2,000 similar villages. We visited the museum and met Englishman Adrian Greenwood who has made the study of Rundligsdorfe his passion since he first arrived in the area from England 20 years ago. He was our guide for the morning. The museum itself was full of old agricultural implements.



Zeetze village church was our next stop. This small stone and timber parish church in a tiny village with a Mill and 2 farms spoke of an agricultural community in former times that has largely evaporated to the towns and cities in search of jobs and prosperity. The church was beautiful and is well curated. We prayed and sang together in a small service that put the building to a use that it now probably only now rarely sees.



After lunch in a traditional Pizza restaurant in the old town square of Dannenberg we set about visiting the remaining charms of the area including the Waldemarturm (now a museum) where Danish King Waldemar II and his son were held prisoner from 1223 – 1224. Another tower was the next stop – this time a timber tower in Hohbeck that overlooked the basin of the River Elbe, once the border of East and West Germany.



Sunday morning's church service at the Katherinenkirche was at 10.30am. The service allowed Angela Gerrard to thank our hosts and to present them with preserved Pershore Plums in the form of Jam and Chutney – a tradition that is set to continue into the future.

Knowing how passionate the English are about museums we then set off after lunch to the Freilicht (open-air) Museum in Diesdorf. This is a collection of old buildings that have been re-located to form a village similar to the Avoncroft Museum of Buildings in Bromsgrove. Indeed the similarities were quite pronounced – there was even a windmill! Our hosts were delighted to have an excuse to show us round – many not having visited previously themselves! How often do we ourselves need the excuse of having a visitor before doing something cultural ourselves!



Our evening meal was held in the courtyard of another wonderful Italian restaurant in Salzwedel. Again we all sat together on one table – guests and hosts. One large group of friends who, a few days before, were strangers. We sensed the bond that connects us without even having to say as much. We are one in Christ. One church, one family. Members of a worldwide group of followers. How wonderful to have the opportunity to remind ourselves of our earthly and heavenly connections and destiny.



Monday morning's church service took place in a small chapel at the Katherinenkirche. Our hosts were so kind – many had taken the morning off work to spend a final hour or two together with us. The service, as all previous ones, provided many opportunities to worship in either language. Our abschiedsfruestuck (departing breakfast) was a sad and happy event. There was yet more coffee and cake and rolls. Our hosts provided enough for each of us to prepare a roll for lunch with a little bag to put it in. How thoughtful!!

One the way back to the airport in Hannover for our evening flight we agreed to take the opportunity to respectfully reflect on the tragedy and consequences of the second world war. We visited the site of the former Bergen Belsen Nazi Concentration Camp which became the final resting place of tens of thousands of innocent men women and children – including Ann Frank and members of her family. Today the site is peaceful. Buses of school children come and go. The enormity of the events which took place within living memory are impossible to imagine. We left realising the importance of our visit and the significance of the freedoms we now take for granted.

Our hosts have been very much in our hearts and minds since we have returned. Technology makes it relatively easy to stay in touch and we are already planning ahead to their visit to Pershore in 2019. Cuisine and culture are bound to feature. History will also play a part as we contemplate National Trust options! But most important of all is the prospect of new friendships and the rekindling and renewal of old bonds with our German brothers and sisters in Christ!

Michael Hodges

June 2018